

SHAPING HUMANE VALUES — POPULAR MEDIA AND MUCH MORE*

NICHOLAS B. VAN DYCK, PH.D.

Past President
National Council for Families and Television
New York, New York

WHY CARE about shaping humane values? The answer is broader than our interests in the role of any single institution, even the media. Humane initiatives flourish to the extent that the social environment nurtures them. Indeed, the society we champion because it supports initiative depends upon the lively potency of widely-held values—honesty, integrity, freedom within the context of compassion and justice, rewarding work, and care for the well being of others as well as self.

An important influence on the framers of the Constitution was Charles Louis Montesquieu's 1748 treatise, *The Spirit of Laws*. Montesquieu convincingly argues that democracy depends on a virtuous citizenry. Democracies have not lasted forever. To date, they have risen and fallen in a predictable pattern. Bondage gives rise to revolutionary faith which in turn paves the way for courage, leading to action that brings freedom. Prosperity follows. In many instances, self interest grows as an accepted norm; voting patterns become characterized by narrow interests; for the majority complacency sets in; then apathy. (The United States currently claims the dubious distinction of being 76th out of 77 democracies in voter turn-out for national elections.) Social and political apathy is followed by collapse, the return of authoritarian rule, and once again bondage. But a virtuous citizenry makes all the difference because it sees through the short-term appeal of self interest and the illusion of immunity that ignores consequences of complacency and apathy. Shaping humane values—or cultivating a virtuous citizenry—is of profound importance.

POPULAR MEDIA

Much of the time, many popular media enterprises fall prey to myopic preoccupation with short-term profits usually gained through titillation and

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exploitation of a tired audience. This happens at the expense of the long-term cultivation of the very audience that guarantees their own first amendment freedoms—the virtuous citizens of the land. Yes, insofar as the commercial television industry fails to take the high road it bites the hand that feeds it.

Audience overconsumption of television is of equal concern. It is a mental and physical health problem because of the time *not* being spent doing other things, such as exercising initiative and the body.

Another real and present danger is the privatization of American life. Television undercuts the democratic process by undermining habits of social intercourse, volunteerism, and political assembly. Ronald Collins observed that “charmed by the screen, we have produced a generation that has never seen the inside of a city council chamber.”

Much of the audience has also been seduced by commercial television’s necessarily dominant message—consumerism—“I buy, therefore I am.” What are some results of the privatization of American life and the triumph of consumerism? Prosperity turns inward. Civic complacency grows. Civility dies. Apathy toward society and political process sets in.

However, popular media are in the business of reaching the largest possible audiences. They must pay close attention to the interests, curiosities, and mores of a general public whose hopes, aspirations, and values are shaped, to a large extent, by other institutions. Therefore, attention is better drawn toward the institutions that provide arenas for humane interaction and the greater long-term influences that shape values—the family, churches and synagogues, schools, the work place, government, and medicine. What is happening within these institutions to shape humane values and to cultivate a virtuous citizenry as we pull out of the 1980s and approach the 21st century?

FAMILY

It is no secret that many families are under greater stress. One reason is that many have been seduced by an image of the good life which has made them slaves to economic pressures that steal time and energy from the tasks of being parents. There is a powerful myth in the land that our birthright is a standard of living, measured not in terms of adequate housing, accessible health care, and excellence in education, but almost exclusively by what we buy. Semioticians tell us that we weave each other into a mutually-seductive web of symbols—the kind of car we drive, the labels on our jeans, and the gadgets we own.

For some, perceived economic necessities have resulted in patterns of single parents and two-breadwinner marriages that have left 63% of all Amer-

ican families with children under 18 with no full-time spouse for child care. Perhaps most telling is the statistic showing that 50% of infants under 18 months have both parents in the work force. Values for humane relationships are, of course, best learned through interaction with a parent or parents in the early years.

Urie Bronfenbrenner puts it more colorfully: "In order to develop normally, a child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity with the child. In short, somebody has to be crazy about the kid." All this takes time. Happily, one myth is dying—the myth of "quality time." Edward Zigler notes that we "tried to convince ourselves that doing the 'zoo bit' on Sundays . . . would take care of parental responsibilities. That's nonsense. . . . A child needs lots of time and it's all quality time." Happily, many "new traditionalists" are increasingly accepting the prescription for parenthood: A little craziness and a lot of time.

There are strong signs that laissez-faire attitudes toward parenting and family life—or benign neglect—that characterized the last two decades are losing ground to renewed commitments. Witness the response of magazine editors and television sitcom programmers. We can hope that government policy will not be far behind.

Yes, the climate is changing. A recent survey of 30,000 parents found 95% saying that in spite of the difficult challenges, given the choice to start over, they would still have children. And, further, from a long list of priorities for their children, "a happy marriage" and "spiritual well being" come out on top, "financial success" near the bottom.

CHURCHES AND SYNAGOGUES

Key resources for shaping humane values are found among the churches and synagogues that dot the landscape of this nation. They remain, by virtue of long established mandate, an often overlooked foundation upon which rests the continuation of a just, compassionate, and productive commitment to a worthwhile future. Here, generation upon generation have found the will and passion to value virtue through faith, hope, and charity. Congregations remain the locus where, in an average week, 40% of all Americans meet to be reminded that the human enterprise stands or falls on the basis of a faith in God that leads to an enlightened self awareness and in turn blossoms into a lively consideration for others, as well as for self.

The strength of this nation's social fabric and its quality of life depends upon its citizens' voluntary consideration for others. A recent study by the Gallup Organization shows that three times as many participants in churches

and synagogues are “very active” in their “involvement with civic, social, and charitable activities” as are nonparticipants. The public interest is particularly well served by religious institutions.

SCHOOLS

Here, too, the news is good. Misguided hypersensitivity to the demands of pluralism has rendered much of public education a vapid, value-free wasteland. The many-splendored heritage of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Mill, Kant, and the Judeo-Christian tradition was reduced to “Whatever turns you on,” and “If it feels good, go for it.” Happily, the climate is changing to include a renewed appreciation for the legitimacy, if not the imperative, of value-oriented sensibilities in education.

THE WORK PLACE

Once more there is good news. Conference agenda and college curricula are featuring business ethics and corporate responsibility as never before. Outrage over misconduct is a media staple. Scrutiny of the merely self-interested, upwardly mobile young professional is much in vogue. For more and more corporations, doing well in the long run is increasingly being seen as a function of doing good now, in communities and also among families, through policies that honor the tension between the demands of home and office.

GOVERNMENT

Federal policies have reflected the recent mood of prosperity turned inward and the proliferation of narrowly self-serving political action committees. However, it may be that the nation will awaken to the pain of the morning after its binge of me-first illusions and sort out the recent confusion of legitimate hope with irresponsible hype. The hangover will not be fun, but at least we may be on the road to detoxification. We now know that a worthwhile future has everything, to do with our children’s legacy of health, education, and compassion, as well as the level of fiscal burdens in the years ahead.

MEDICINE

Advances in health care in our lifetime boggle the mind. Yours is a proud profession. Your mandate flows from compassion and caring—humane values. You are physicians, nurse practitioners, and public health officers. You deserve great respect and acclaim. Challenges remain. Universal access to quality care is one. Perhaps your profession, in league with health care

institutions, insurers, legislators, and government agencies can look toward making yet another powerful statement that will help shape the humane values upon which our well being depends, and especially the well being of our children and their children for generations to come.

Shaping humane values? Rather than being prime movers, popular media reflect the drift or flow of society. The most heard-and-seen storytellers of our age are beholden to market forces that shape their message. The media need an audience measured in tens of millions to watch and then to buy products and services advertised. To gain their audiences, the media show and tell what they believe their audiences want to see and hear. In doing so they reinforce the current drift and flow.

But, the fact of the matter is that you and I are the real, live, actively-related, and most-potent storytellers. Each of us is a player on the stage in several arenas; the family, school, church or synagogue, the work place, our professional calling, and the democratic processes of our land. Never before have the words of William Blake been so true, "We become the stories we tell."

In all these arenas we have a guiding star. It is the criterion by which the worth of a society is measured. It is a criterion that stands the test of history. It is the commitment of one generation to shaping humane values for and among the next—in short, cultivating a virtuous citizenry.